



in the
moment

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Your Culture

By Phil Ramsey

Have you noticed how often the term 'culture' is used in the context of organisational change?

Rugby teams need to change their culture if they want to win matches. Corporations spend thousands pursuing culture change. And, no doubt, various governments have been anxious to change the culture of New Zealand education.



With so much talk about culture you could be excused for thinking that everyone knows what the term means. Yet one of the world's true experts on culture - Cambridge University's Professor Charles Hampden-Turner - likens a culture to a multi-hued creature that is so dazzling in appearance that, while everyone admires its beauty, none can agree of a description. Why is the meaning of 'culture' so elusive? And what if you want to change the culture of your school or centre?

To illustrate the meaning of culture, as an exercise we sometimes get groups to describe what New Zealand culture is like. One of the most common responses we get is the phrase "laid back". Almost always, words used to describe the national culture, are positive.

To dig deeper, we look more closely at the phrase laid back, by asking "Would this description make sense to someone from Singapore?" Most agree it would. Then we ask, "Would it make sense to someone from Samoa?" At this question people begin to smile as the challenge of describing a culture begins to become apparent. Singaporeans might view New Zealanders as laid back, but Samoans are likely to think of Kiwis as in a rush.

This illustrates a couple of key concepts about culture. First, culture is not a "thing" that can be objectively described. Rather, culture refers to what makes one community different from another. It is useful to think of culture as a "collection of differences". You can tell you have crossed a boundary from one community to another because you start to notice important differences. And the differences you notice depend on what boundary you have just crossed. Was it from Singapore to New Zealand, or Samoa to New Zealand? Differences make a difference..

Understanding Differences

Whenever we have done something the same way for a time, our actions and choices begin to slip beneath our level of consciousness. We do things as if we are "on automatic pilot". Other people may do things differently; we do it our way. The term "cultural value" refers to something that a community of people have done so often that it is taken for granted as the right way to do it, or the right thing to do.

We get to know our own values (the things we take for granted as right) when we encounter people who are different. This is the origin of the phrase "travel broadens the mind". When we travel we encounter people who don't do what we expect. We take it for granted they will do it our way, and they don't. We have encountered a different culture, and we have the opportunity to broaden our minds, opening them up to new possibilities we haven't considered.

Recall how most people, when asked to describe New Zealand culture, use positive terms. It's a natural response - typically we do the same. With a little more thought, though, we can recognise that some things we take for granted in our communities are dysfunctional or unhealthy. Often, they were once relatively harmless, but now they have been taken to an extreme.

Many people who use the term 'culture' act as if there are only two types of culture: good and bad. When we understand culture as a collection of differences, we realise that all cultures develop because they have elements of 'good'. Communities value doing things a particular way because doing so works for them. All cultures have elements of 'bad': any value can be taken to an extreme that turns out to be harmful.

If your school or centre is identified by values that are differing from a neighbouring school or centre (in other words, they have different cultures) then you are likely to be very aware of the advantages your values give you over your neighbour. Of course, what you take for granted means you are missing out - probably without being fully aware of it - of advantages that might come from the neighbour's values.

Culture change is, fundamentally, the process of becoming aware of what we take for granted. And, rather than rejecting one set of values in favour of another, successful culture change usually involves reconciling values that appear to be opposite to one another. Communities find ways to both 'act collectively' and 'honour individual effort'; to 'hold on to traditions' while taking an 'experimental orientation' to life.

Here are some questions to consider: What characterises your school or centre? What advantages do you get from your current values? What might you be missing out on? How can you build on the foundation your current culture has provided for you?

Types of Delegation

By Phil Ramsey

Leaders often struggle with delegation.

They want to empower people go ahead and make decisions. At the same time, they don't want people randomly making decisions that impact on everyone else, with no collaborative talk to check. If the leader says 'No' to too many ideas, they worry that people will start to feel they can't do anything. And if the leader say 'Yes' too often, people might feel free to do anything.

If this is a challenge you have faced, the way forward can be to have a means of explaining the different kinds of decisions, and the different levels of authority that are involved. Sarah Scott, (*author of 'Fierce Conversations'*) provides a handy "tree" model of decision making. She outlines 4 types of decisions: leaf, branch, trunk and root decisions.



Trees have plenty of leaves; a tree can even afford to lose a few when things go wrong. 'Leaf' decisions involve issues that have limited impact on the work of others. A school principal or centre manager may explain to a teacher that she is free to experiment with various practices; there is no need to even report on what has been done.

A 'branch' decision is one that involves others within the school/centre. There is probably need for consultation with those others before action. And the leader will want to know about the action that has been taken, with regular reporting.

Trunk decisions are those that affect the whole team. Don't make 'trunk' decisions unilaterally. They need to be thought through, consequences considered, and action coordinated. A wrong move at this level can kill the tree.

Roots provide the tree with stability and nourishment. A root decision gets to the very identity and survival of the tree. The message to people about some aspects of the organisation is "Don't Touch! This is a root issue!"

Try using a model like this to explain the level of authority you think is reasonable. The model gives you the opportunity to reveal your thinking about the balance between empowering people and safeguarding the health of the entire system.

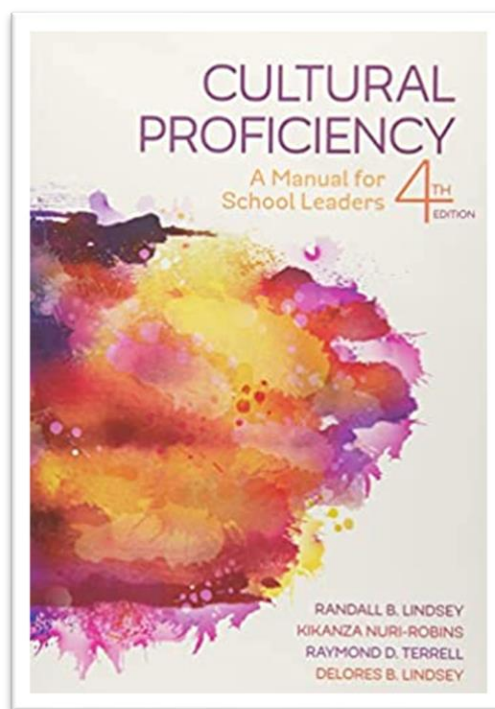
BOOK REVIEW: Cultural Proficiency

By Phil Ramsey

Authors Lindsey, Robins and Terrell have written a great book for school leaders, aimed at helping them to develop “cultural proficiency”.

The book is filled with exercises and opportunities for reflection that enable people to get a clear grasp of how culture affects them and their relationships with others. While written with the US context in mind, the book is handy for anyone wanting to create learning opportunities around the topic.

Special emphasis is placed on getting a shared understanding of the language of culture change as a foundation for shared action.'



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Before people can talk about individual behaviour or organisational practice they need practices that enable conversation to happen. They point out, for instance, that little change results from a conversation in which one person calls another a “racist”.

A particularly handy tool used throughout is the Cultural Proficiency Continuum, which describes the variety of ways that people might respond to differences. At one end of the continuum is “cultural destructiveness”: the default setting some have of “see the difference, stamp it out!” At the other is “cultural proficiency”, where people know how to learn about individual and organisational differences, enabling them to interact effectively in a variety of settings. The continuum names some common responses we may encounter (or display), such as “cultural blindness”: see the difference, act like you don’t.

Many teachers and leaders are tempted by the idea that “culture doesn’t matter”. They may think that if they treat everyone the same they will be acting in line with professional standards. The reality is, most people are unaware of the degree to which they are influenced by their own cultural values, so treating everyone the same really means, treating people “as if they were me.”

Introducing Intensive Learning Teams

By Phil Ramsey

Have you ever felt that there was something missing from the Professional Development efforts in your school or centre? Take a moment to consider whether Intensive Learning Teams (ILTs) might fill a critical gap in the professional learning of you and others on your staff.

People in all types of organisations feel frustrated when work gets 'silo-ed'. While we enjoy exercising autonomy over what we do, often independent effort gets taken too far. We have an in-built, natural desire to collaborate with others; it's annoying to find that someone in the room next door has solved a problem we are still grappling with, or has a piece of information we needed but didn't have an opportunity to share it.



People work in silos when information moves up and down the organisation but not side to side. Sure, colleagues might talk to one another about non-work issues (sports, the weather, etc.) or when they need to vent about the latest frustrations. But work challenges are either addressed independently by the worker or in consultation with either the boss (communication upward) or with direct reports (communication downward).

Many schools and centres have worked hard to get people learning together. But when a group of autonomous practitioners are sitting in the same room, experiencing the same training, hearing the same lecture, enjoying the same discussion, the silos have not really disappeared. Why not?

When people do something together they operate as a community. There are important relationships that affect how people think and feel. When people experience PD together we could call them a 'community of interest': they are brought together because of a shared interest in the topic. At the end of the PD, the community disbands and teachers return to their classes/learning environments. Maybe they will do something different, or maybe not, depending on each individual teacher. They were a community during the PD; now they are back to being autonomous practitioners.

There are other forms of community that generate different outcomes. A 'community of practice' is a group of people who share the same interest but do not allow the community to disband just because a session of PD has ended. Rather, the purpose of the community is to develop shared practices to address the challenges they have in common.

In a healthy community of practice, sessions of PD are just one element in a range of learning activities that the community might engage in together. They keep engaging in professional learning because they are determined to lift the level of professional practice of everyone in the community.

What is the key difference between communities of practice and communities of interest? The guiding purpose is different. A community of practice deliberately seeks to change the practice of those who belong. It is all about learning together to do things differently.

How Big?

Theoretically a community of practice can be of any size. As it gets bigger it becomes more difficult to manage. You have no doubt had experience of sitting in a large group and noticing the affect size has on people's willingness to talk. Once the group gets over 5 or 6 some people start feeling uncomfortable about sharing their thoughts; they leave the talking to others who are more confident or extroverted.

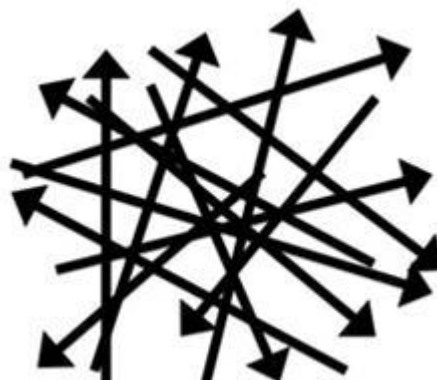
Keeping the numbers small also means it is natural for members of the community to get to know one another's personalities, and to factor this in to consideration of what a change of practice will mean for different people. In a large group the danger is that discussions take place about what a mythical "standard" person could do. In a small group the focus can stay on the practice of the actual people involved.

For these reasons InterLEAD is pursuing focusing attention on what we call 'Intensive Learning Teams'. We hope to encourage small groups of practitioners within schools and centres to follow some well established processes designed to help them operate as effective teams who can 'raise the bar' in terms of individual and collective teaching practice. We believe this is a way to give real meaning to PD efforts and to generate the levels of innovation needed to make a real difference to learning outcomes.

Innovation Or Creativity: What Do We Want?

By Phil Ramsey

Intensive Learning Teams generate innovations in teaching practice. Members in the team are encouraged to try out new practices that make a difference to the results they get. Some people - usually principals or managers who need to get results - can be uncomfortable with the thought of 'unbridled' innovation. They imagine, and fear, that ILTs could be a vehicle for highly creative people to 'go nuts' at great cost to the school or centre. Such fears stem from misconceptions about innovation and, specifically, confusion about the difference between innovation and creativity.



What is the difference?

Creativity is about sparking new ideas. Often creativity sparks radical new forms that have little practical value. A team might be full of creative people doing creative things, yet have little to show in the way of results that matter. Creativity needs to be "bridled". Letting people loose so they can fully express all their creative urges generally results in costly chaos.

Innovation, on the other hand, does not need to be bridled. It is already focused on achieving results that are of practical value. In their book *'Innovative Intelligence'*, David Weiss and Claude Legrand explain that innovation is "applied creativity that achieves business value". It is the process that allows individuals, teams and organisations to change their practice in order to achieve their goals.

When schools/centres set goals they do so in order to stimulate growth and learning. There is little point in setting a goal that the school/centre can already achieve. So goals require innovation. The nature of schools/centres creates parameters within which innovation must occur: they are restrained by finances, roll, location and so forth. To be truly innovative means finding ways of achieving goals within these important parameters.

Organisations everywhere are struggling to innovate. They may set goals, only to find that people keep doing what they have always done. We need to learn to think in terms of innovation, particularly given the complexity of school/centre life. ILTs are a vehicle for collective innovation.

Moving Upstream From Outcomes

By Phil Ramsey

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the data generated by your school/centre? You are not alone; many leaders, both in education and in other organisations, feel bewildered as they try to keep track of what performance data is telling them.



Tom Johnson, (author of the books 'Relevance Lost' and 'Profit Beyond Measure') has described the performance data generated by organisations as being like a great river of information. He says that when he first worked as an accountant it felt like he was in a small boat at the mouth of the river, right where it is at its widest. Numbers kept flowing at him so fast it was hard to keep track of what they meant; most organisations struggled to use the data they produced to make sensible management decisions. Johnson sees his career as an effort to move upstream in order to find the activities and thinking that produces the data in the first place.

Intensive Learning Teams need data as a foundation for their collaborative learning efforts. Data can help them to set goals, design actions and assess progress. But what data? Like Johnson, ILTs need to head upstream to find data that makes real sense.

Much of the data available in education relates to the performance of students and children. Learning outcomes are what it is all about, but how useful is this for a team of teachers wanting to make a difference to their practice? Teachers realise that data about learning outcomes is 'messy': lots of variables have contributed to what the data shows - most outside the teachers' control - and it is hard to untangle the meaning. Learning outcome data is also typically lag data: by the time it arrives it may be too late to do anything about it.

Going upstream involves looking for data about the practices that contributed to the learning outcomes. While other things also contributed, practices are under the control of the teachers and involve lead data: it helps you identify actions that will shape the future, not just make you more informed about history.

Even further upstream is data about teachers' competencies. Underlying patterns of thinking, managing self, relating to others and participating and contributing all impact on a teacher's ability to (1) learn new practices, (2) contribute to the professional learning of others in an ILT, and (3) model key competencies to students and children.

InterLEAD's Appraisal Connector System* is proving to be an effective instrument for generating "upstream" data on teaching practices and competencies. ILTs can increase the intensity of their work together by basing it on powerful data like that from ACS.

**This system is now referred to as InterLEAD Connector™*